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Author(s): Richard Gregg

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The Writer and His Quiff: How Young Gogol' Sought To Shape His Public Image

RICHARD GREGG

When describing Gogol''s physical appearance, biographers have traditionally awarded pride of place to the writer's long, pointed nose, usually adding that the "nosological" motif in his works doubtless stems from this facial peculiarity. During the early St. Petersburg years (1829–36), however, acquaintances were quite as struck by another aspect of the young writer's appearance. Thus, when Sergei Aksakov first set eyes on Gogol' it was a quiff (*khokhol*) of hair perched over a clean-shaven face which caught his attention.[1] Similarly, M. N. Longinov, then the eight-year-old pupil of the young Gogol', later recalled the tuft of hair (*khokholok*) on the top of his head, which, he unkindly added, was "in no way distinguished by the elegance of its coiffure."[2] No less critical was Longinov's better known contemporary P. V. Annenkov, who remarked upon "the tall, curled and whipped up quiff of hair," which adorned Gogol''s forehead, and which gave him the look of a rooster.[3] Not to be outdone, P. P. Karatygin recalled, perhaps hyperbolically, a shortish blond young man sporting a "huge tuft of hair."[4] Confirming the existence though not the excessive size of the quiff is A. G. Venetsianov's portrait (Fig. 1, 1834), which depicts a dandified young man with a well-groomed, clean-shaven face, topped off by a generous tuft of curly, blondish hair.

Two points regarding this cosmetic affectation deserve mention. The first is that, unlike Gogol''s nose, the quiff was an artificial construct. As Annenkov's description and the Venetsianov portrait make clear, the elevated tuft was the studied product of scissors, brush, and comb. The second (related) point is that it was a temporary phenomenon: a likeness of Gogol' as a lycee student shows a youth with hair plastered closely to his head.

[1]S. T. Aksakov, *Istoriia moego znakomstva s Gogol'em* (Moscow, 1960), 10. The fact that the hairdo in question was not uncommon among the dandies of the day only underscores the comments of Aksakov and the other acquaintances quoted here. If the quiff had not clearly exceeded the norms of fashion it would not have elicited the surprise of observers.

[2]V. Veresaev, ed., *Gogol' v zhizni* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1933), 97.

[3]Ibid., 117.

[4]Ibid., 158.

The Russian Review 63 (January 2004): 63–69
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Moreover when a decade later Gogol', now a celebrity, returned to Russia from abroad, the same Aksakov who had remarked on the upstart quiff now noted that in its place—and portraits of the period again confirm the fact—were "thick locks of hair falling down almost to his shoulders"[5]

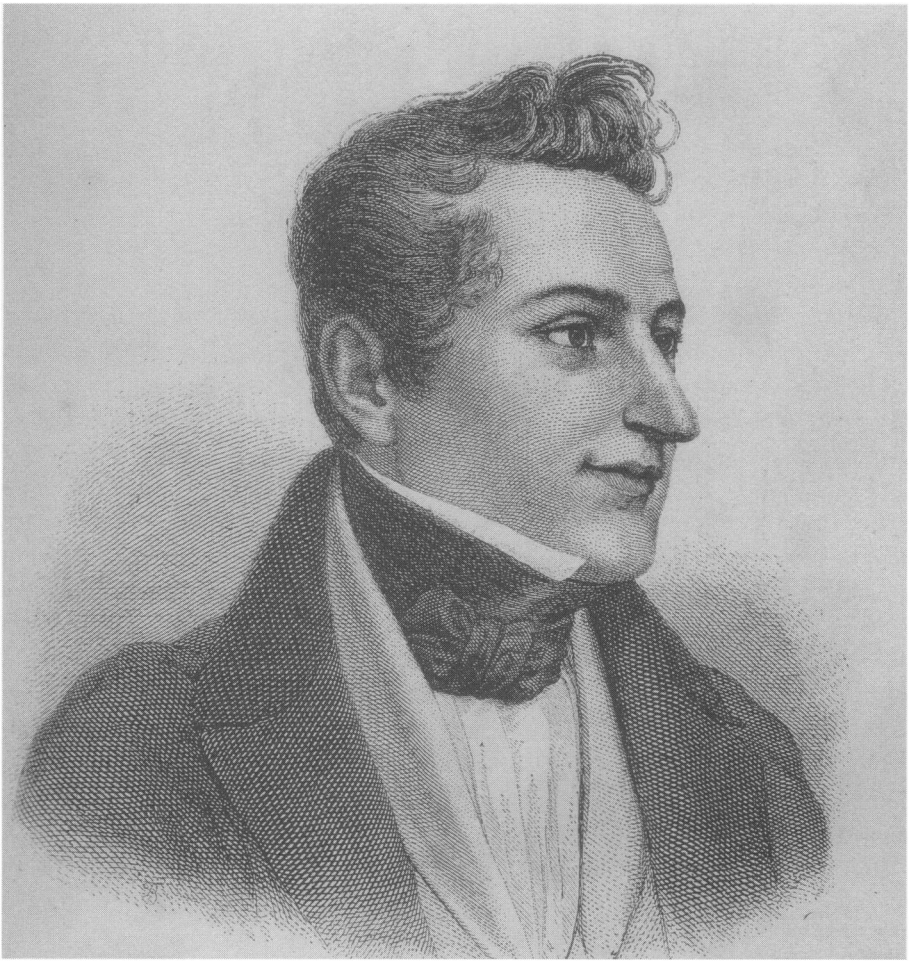

FIG. 1 "N. V. Gogol'." By A. Venetsianov. Frontispiece from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii N. V. Gogolia v vos'mi tomakh*, ed. A. E. Gruzinskii, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1912).

The years which saw the rise (and eventual fall) of the quiff were, then, the years during which Gogol' rose to eminence as Russia's greatest living writer. And the aura of prestige accompanying that ascent could not but affect this very ambitious young man,

[5]Aksakov, *Istoriia*, 20. At first glance Aksakov's description might mislead the reader. The exact wording is "Gogol"s outward appearance had changed so greatly that he was scarcely recognizable. There were [now] no traces of the closely shaven and cropped—*except for the quiff of hair*—dandy in a fashionable frock coat of previous times." In the given syntactical context the proviso, which I have italicized, refers to the tuft of hair which constituted *at that time*, that is, in the early thirties, the only exception to Gogol"s clean-shaven head.

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whose concern for his public image soon became, according to Annenkov, almost obsessive.[6] It should therefore come as no surprise to learn that Gogol' found strategies to shape that image more substantive than a hairdo. Two of these involved an issue no less important than Gogol''s cultural identity.

Narrowly defined, the first is simply a question of Gogol''s surname. More broadly, however—and more significantly—it involves his class consciousness, his station, that is, in Russian society. Since scholars have already traced with exemplary thoroughness the vicissitudes of Gogol''s family name, it will be enough here to sum up these findings.[7] Briefly: from the historical standpoint Gogol' was an onomastic impostor. Sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century his grandfather, A. D. Ianovskii, in a successful attempt to consolidate his (bogus) claims to nobiliary status (the Ianovskiis were *popovichi*) claimed descent from a certain Ostap Gogol', a Ukrainian Cossack army officer of the previous century. Accordingly, he appended "Gogol'" to his last name. Two generations later the socially ambitious young writer completed the transaction by amputating the plebeian half of his hyphenated name, thereby becoming "Gogol'" *tout court*.[8]

The dubiousness of this geneological claim could not have remained unknown to Gogol'—which of course only exacerbated his need to conceal the fact. Thus, when writing to her son, Gogol''s mother used his legal, that is, hyphenated, name, she earned a reproof for her efforts.[9] When the Longinov children (supra) committed the same offence they were tartly informed that "Ianovskii" was a Polish (!) invention.[10] When, later, a Ukrainian cousin, calling himself "Gogol'-Ianovskii," surfaced in St. Petersburg and claimed kinship to the writer, Gogol' objected, roundly declaring that only he had the right to be called "Gogol'."[11] The success of these ploys—including of course the use of the abridged, "gentrified" surname in all his writings—was complete. By the 1840s the writer was known to all the world as "Gogol'." Today only the "specialist" is likely to be privy to his onomastic secret.

A second way Gogol' shaped his image involved his ethnic allegiance. Gogol''s "Russianness" might, at first glance, seem to be self-evident. His formal education was in Russian; all of his letters—save one—and all his recorded conversations are in Russian; more important, his entire oeuvre, bellettristic and other, is in Russian.[12] Understandably, Russia has from the start claimed him for her own.

[6]Specifically, Annenkov in his memoirs observed of his friend that "Gogol' always needed a public" and later: "Gogol''s very nature prompted him to seek to influence the crowd through his external presence" (Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 118, 121).

[7]See V. Veresaev, "K biografii Gogolia," *Zveniia*, 1933, no. 2:286–94; and L. Stilman, "Nikolai Gogol and Ostap Hohol," in *Orbis Scriptus: Festchrift für Dmitry Tschizewsky* (Munich, 1968), 811–25.

[8]Conceivably, patriotic considerations may also have played a role here. One could speculate that the Polish Uprising of 1830 intensified Gogol''s pro-Russian sympathies and that in turn increased his desire to get rid of the "tainted" Ianovskii name—Jan being the Polish equivalent of John (or Ivan). The two motivations, the sociological and the patriotic, are not of course mutually exclusive.

[9]N. V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (*PSS*), 14 vols. (Moscow, 1949–52), 10:219.

[10]Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 97.

[11]*PSS* 13:323.

[12]A short letter in Ukrainian to B. Zaleskii (*PSS* 11:88).

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Nevertheless one cannot take Gogol''s sense of his Russian identity for granted. Born and bred in the Ukraine of Ukrainian parents, he spoke the language,[13] exploited—the word is used advisedly[14]—Ukrainian settings and characters in his early fiction (*Dikana*, *Mirgorod*), and showed an abiding attachment to his native customs and culture. Since Gogol''s many-faceted "Little Russian" ties have received over the years intensive and detailed scrutiny, it will suffice here to note that by the end of the decade Gogol''s outward show of interest in "things Ukrainian" had begun to wane.[15] His plans to write a multivolume history of his native land had come to nothing; his efforts to secure a teaching post at the University of Kiev were abandoned, and the Ukrainian landscapes of the early fiction gave way to the Russian ambiance of *The Inspector General* and the "St. Petersburg Cycle" of tales. In his last and most ambitious fictional undertaking, *Dead Souls*, the Ukraine does not figure at all.

In sum: the years during which Gogol', in two quite different (though not wholly unconnected)[16] ways sought to shape his public image were the same years during which he sported a striking quiff of hair. And the theory proposed here is that these three image-shaping strategies were related; that, indeed, in fashioning his quiff Gogol' was making a statement directly related to his cultural identity.

On the face of things this idea might seem preposterous. Whoever heard of a person asserting strong feelings about class and country by changing his hairdo? As for the claim that Gogol' was "making a statement" thereby—can a statement which has gone unnoticed for more than a century and a half be worthy of that name?

On further reflection, however, these objections tend to support the very arguments which they aim to discredit. The person who could compare the facade of St. Peter's at Rome to a chamberpot and astound a recently bereaved widow with a joke (!) about her tragic loss knew the comic uses (and abuses) of the outrageous juxtaposition of unlikes.[17] As for the objection that one cannot simultaneously make a statement and conceal it—did not that pair of opposites inhere in Gogol' himself? For he whose compulsive secretiveness was notorious among friends could also reveal through provocative behavior, extravagant attire, and virtuoso performances of his own works an exhibitionistic streak as well. The paradoxical expression "hidden exposure" is then an oxymoron quite in keeping with what we know of Gogol''s character.

[13]The error-free letter mentioned in footnote 12, and the fact that Gogol' spoke to his Ukrainian boyservant in Ukrainian, attest to Gogol''s command of the language.

[14]Citing a letter dated April 1829, in which Gogol' asked his mother to provide him with detailed information about Ukrainian customs, costumes, and the like (*PSS* 10:141), critics have convincingly argued that this ambitious young writer was planning to exploit the currently fashionable literary penchant for exotic settings, ethnic mores, and *couleur locale*. However probable, such a contention does not of course disprove Gogol''s well attested attachment to the folk music, cuisine, and historical past of his native land.

[15]On Gogol''s ties to "Little Russia" see P. A. Karpuk, "Gogol''s Research on Ukrainian Customs for the *Dikanka* Tales," *Russian Review* 56 (April 1997): 209–32; D. B. Saunders, "Contemporary Critics of Gogol''s *Vechera* and the Debate about Russian *Narodnost'* (1831-1832)," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 5 (1981): 66–82; and, most extensively, George S. N. Luckyj, *Between Gogol' and Ševčenko* (Munich, 1971), 88–127.

[16]The fact that Ostap Gogol' (a historical person, though a fictive ancestor) was a Ukrainian Cossack officer may be seen as linking gentrifying myth and the ethnic fact.

[17]On these two episodes see Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 305 and 155, respectively.

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To establish the possibility of an event is of course not to prove that it actually took place. Evidence for the theory advanced is, however, not wanting. And in view of Gogol"s well-known fascination with words and wordplay it is not surprising that the evidence is verbal in nature.

Gogol"s "ethnic" statement first. Although *ukrainskii* is now the standard Russian word for that East Slavic ethnic group, two other words were—and still are—used by Russians to designate their cousins to the South; namely, *malorossiianin* (more frequently met in its adjectival form, *malorossiiskii*) and *khokhol*—the latter word metonymically derived from *that tuft of hair which Ukrainian men once wore on their foreheads and which distinguished them from their Great Russian neighbors*. The italicized phrase speaks for itself and makes clear one possible motif for young Gogol"s provocative hairdo. Not content with showcasing his ethnic sympathies through his literary works, this unreconstructed Ukrainian began in playful imitation of his ancestors to brush his hair into that quiff which was both symbol and synonym for his Little Russian heritage. That Gogol' should use that same, slightly humorous word when referring to his ethnic "self" further enhances the likelihood of the pun.[18]

One apparent "blip" to the proposed scheme of things deserves notice, if only because it illuminates the syndrome from a fresh angle. In 1839, on his return home to Russia, Gogol' made the acquaintance of I. I. Panaev (the future editor of *The Contemporary*) in the home of a mutual friend, A. A. Prokopovich. Recalling their meeting Panaev remembered, among other unprepossessing details, a "fairly elevated tuft" of hair which decorated the writer's brow![19] Flatly contradicting, as it does, Aksakov's recollection dating from the same period (and all contemporary likenesses of the writer), this description inevitably poses the question: Why did Gogol' on this particular occasion revert to the hairdo of yesteryear?

The Ukrainian origins of the writer's host offers us a clue here. Indeed, in the given historical context a plausible scenario all but writes itself. Recently returned from three years abroad, where he was suspected—not without cause—of having succumbed to Westernizing influences (Catholic leanings, pro-Polish sympathies,[20] a preference of Italy to his native land),[21] the prodigal now finds himself in the home of his old friend and compatriot. Eager to deomonstrate that he is not an apostate, he playfully reinstates in honor of his host that *khokhol*, which not only stood for their old Ukrainian "school tie" (he and Prokopovich were in fact lycee classmates at Nezhin), but which in the popular sense of that Russian word both of them *were*. As plausible sounding as it is impossible to prove, this reading gains further credibility when we note that it was in this Ukrainian ambiance that Gogol"s quiff was sighted for the last time.

[18]*PSS* 12:418–19 (Gogol' here uses the adjectival form, *khokhlatskii*).

[19]Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 216.

[20]In 1837 in Rome Gogol' struck up a friendship with Zinaida Volkonskaia, a zealous convert to Roman Catholicism, who sought to bring him into the fold. About Gogol"s pro-Polish sympathies see Luckyj, *Between Gogol' and Ševčenko*, 118.

[21]For instance, returning to Rome in 1837 after a brief visit to France, Gogol' wrote to M. P. Balabina that he was returning to his true "motherland" (Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 184); and to the same correspondent he had earlier written: "Whoever has been to Italy, that person can say 'goodbye' to all other countries" (*PSS* 11:105).

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Gogol''s second attempt to alter his public image involved, as noted above, changing the appearance of his name. And the most obvious way to compass this end was to use "Gogol'" in his writings and correct all those who called him "Ianovskii." Which he did.

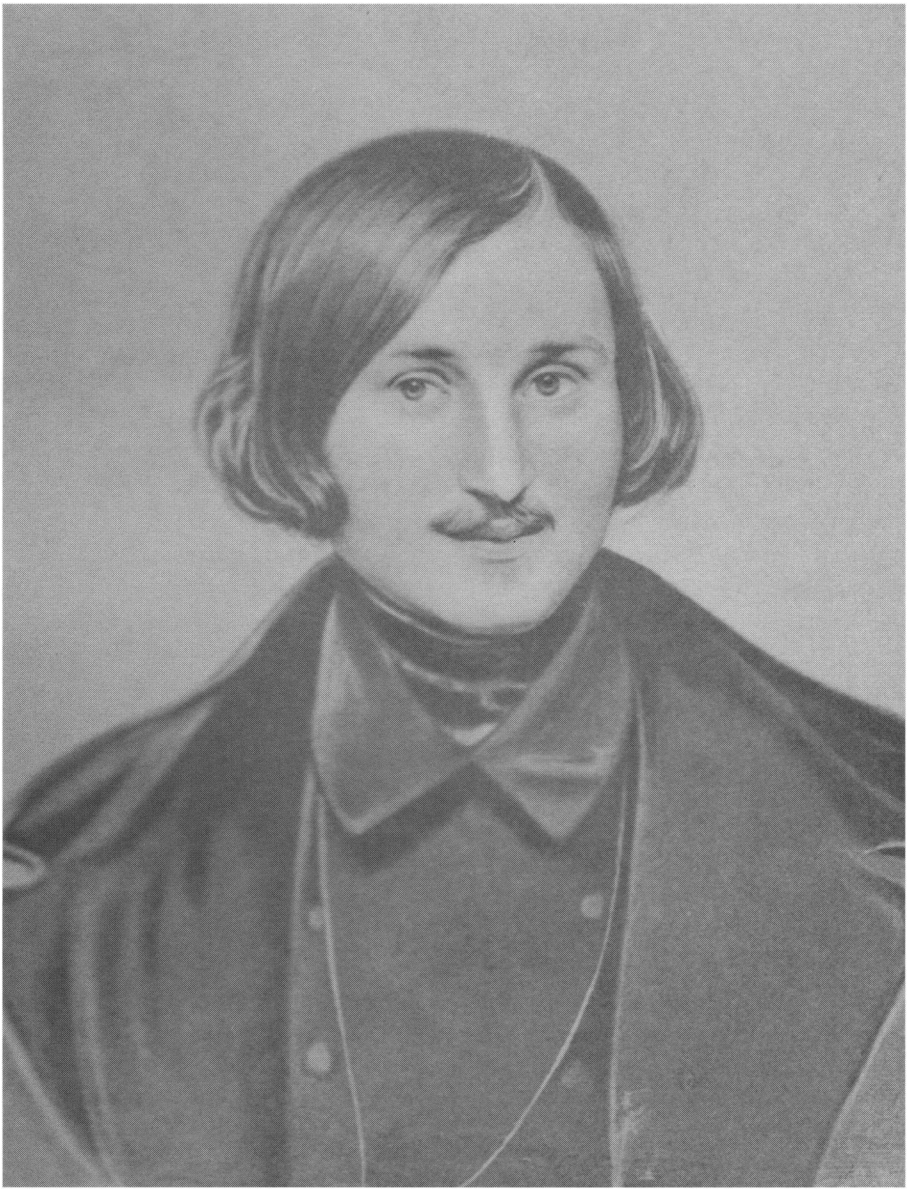

FIG. 2 "N. V. Gogol' v 1841 g." By F. A. Moller (Tret'iakov Gallery). Frontispiece from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii N. V. Gogolia v vos'mi tomakh*, ed. A. E. Gruzinskii, vol. 2 (Moscow, 1912).

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But the writer was not one to settle for the merely obvious. Obliquity for Gogol' was second nature; and true to the principle of "hidden exposure" and obeying a perhaps subliminal need to display his "new" surname, this inveterate player with words smuggled "gogol'" (the bird) into literary texts,[22] surreptitiously scratched "Gogol'" (the name) on public surfaces,[23] and flaunted a quiff of hair for reasons which (one surmises) went well *beyond* the ethnic motivations just noted.

Historical fact offers the necessary framework for this conjecture. Ever since Gogol''s grandfather identified Ostap Gogol' as an ancestor, the hyphenated name was used by him and his descendants.[24] When at home, therefore, what young Gogol' heard from tradespeople, servants, serfs, and so on, was "Gogol'-Ianovskii" pronounced *in the vernacular*. The linguistic proviso is crucial here because, as is known, the phonetic equivalent of the Russian "g" in Ukrainian is a "kh" sound. What Gogol' regularly heard then was not "Gogol'" but "Khokhol'"!

True, small phonetic differences prevent the fit from being perfect. The "kh" sound is voiced in Ukrainian, the final "l" is hard; and there is of course the accent shift. But if the close resemblance of the two vocables is immediately obvious to the modern reader it is hard to believe that it could have escaped the notice of someone as sensitive to the sound of words as was Gogol'. Which of course is to identify a second symbolic dimension to the *khokhol* which he wore. Or, to frame these same arguments schematically—and by that same token to sum up the gist of the inquiry: if the verbal "double play" (quiff = Ukrainian) doubtless intrigued this self-styled "Khokhol," the "triple-play" (quiff = Ukrainian = surname) must have seemed irresistible.

Finally—and in hopes of dispelling any residual skepticism—I would pose this simple question: Which is more likely, that an imaginative and whimsically inclined young man, exceptionally sensitive to the meaning of words, would for years have worn a "huge" *khokhol* wholly unaware of its semantic resonance; or that that same young man would have sported that same quiff with at least some inkling of the—for him—important ideas which the word *khokhol* conveyed?

[22]In *Taras Bul'ba* and "The Portrait, *PSS* 2:172, and 3:97, respectively.

[23]*PSS* 11:63, 73.

[24]An exception to this was young Gogol''s lycee experience. According to N. V. Kukol'nik, a Nezhin classmate, Gogol' was known as "Ianovskii" *tout court* (Veresaev, *Gogol' v zhizni*, 45).

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